



J. S. Bach – Aspects of the Chaconne for Violin Solo

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Introduction

Johann Sebastian Bach's Partita No. 2 for violin solo, with its last movement, the famous Chaconne, in particular, has made Music History.

Its dimensions are so large and rich in all regards that certainly no other violin solos, neither for any other instrument have reached such unique high standard. Also, it has been analysed and researched many times. Thus, its greatness is ultimately acceptable. This article and performance aim to be a contribution towards an insight to the wonder of Chaconne and share understanding for its significant greatness.

Performance

J. S. Bach: Partita No. 2 d minor BWV 1004 for violin solo

Allemande – Courante – Sarabande – Gigue – Chaconne

Mathias Boegner, violin

(since the performance fills the time frame of 30 minutes, the article may serve as program notes)

1. Bach as a Violinist

Bach was a multiple genius. Besides the fact that he was the well-known and great composer, he was also a violinist, a violist, a pianist, an organist, a concertmaster, a chamber musician and a conductor.

His solo sonatas and partitas vividly indicated that he must be an outstanding violinist.

Due to the popularity in performing these works, they all had been regarded as being pedagogic study works for approximately 100 years before Joseph Joachim started performing them in public. Similar to Bach's own remark to the Well-Tempered Piano: "for the benefit and use of the ambitious studying musical youth, as well as for the study-wise already settled and habituated as a special entertainment set and completed", we can assume this idea for the solo works for violin as well as for those for cello. His son ,Carl Philipp Emmanuel, wrote in a letter to Nikolaus Forkel, the first author of Bach's biography: "As the greatest expert and judge of the harmonies , he preferably played the viola with adjusted wider and thinner strength".

From his youth to his rather old age, he played the violin in tune and penetrating, and thus kept the orchestra in a larger order than he could have with the grand piano.

He completely understood the possibilities of all violin instruments. This was proven by the soli for violin and cello without bass. His student Johann Friedrich Agricola observed Bach at the piano, playing the violin solo works, with an improvised harmonic filling.

This gave an explanation to many arrangements and transcriptions, as well as later the piano accompaniment versions by Schumann and Mendelssohn.

However, it was widely perceived that this was a misunderstanding, and that the solo works

were so perfect that any added extra voice was incapable of improving them. The polyphonic writing for the four-voice violin had already included the bass.

2. The Historic Development of the Solo Partitas and the Chaconne in particular

In the 17th century, the polyphonic violin solo playing reached high standards in Europe.

Bach was certainly aware of the previous works by Biber, Walther, Westhoff, Schmelzer in Germany; Marais, Couperin and others in France. However, regarding his own unique superiority, whether these works had actually inspired him, was difficult to state. The Passacaglias/Chaconnes by Biber and Vitali both had the same bass progression, four steps downwards in g-minor melodic; Bach's Chaconne was the same in d-minor harmonic. From his Italian friends and colleagues, he arranged a large number of works: concertos by Vivaldi and Marcello, for example. Thus, it was assumed that violin techniques such as the arpeggios maybe had some connection with other Italians, such as Tartini or Corelli. Corelli's La Follia was a close idea to the Chaconne, with the same basic rhythm, variations techniques, and the key of d-minor. The Chaconne also had the same basic rhythm as the Sarabande (except starting on the second beat). The Sarabande was found by the Spanish conquerors in South America at the rituals of American Indians. Later on, it was brought to Europe and integrated as the third movement into the Baroque Suite/Partita. Originally, the Indians had this rhythm modified with a tremolo effect on the drum in order to make the spirits leave the body of a dead person. Therefore, the book title questioned by Helga Thoene: "Ciaccona – dance or grave?" the answer can be both. In A danse macabre, D minor symbolically stood for dying. Arnold Steinhardt traced the Chaconne to the Macchu Picchu in Peru where the Maya Indians had their religious ceremonies.

3. Influences from Bach's work

Learning from Bach was obviously an inspiration and challenge to many composers.

Violin solo works were written by several famous composers: E. Ysaye, B. Bartok, P. Hindemith, M. Reger to name but a few. Some, like Reger's Chaconne, were directly inspired whereas others were indirectly inspired such as Ysaye's Ballade in d-minor with chords and dotted rhythms, but in a different form. Other composers who arranged the Chaconne were J. Brahms and F. Busoni for piano, J. Raff for full orchestra, and other composers for string quartet and wind ensembles. In a wider sense, the Chaconne/Passacaglia has become a standard form, for example, in Brahms' 4th symphony. There have been many researches on the difference between Chaconne and Passacaglia, but they have not been proven. The most prominent research belonged to Albert Schweitzer. He believed that the contrast between Chaconne and Passacaglia would be whether the main theme was in the bass or in the soprano voice. Bach's Chaconne definitely had both.

4. Inspiring his Contemporaries

Bach definitely was also standing out among his contemporary composing fellows. The most famous work was the Passacaglia by Handel, arranged several times. Other works were the solo sonatas by Pissendel and the solo fantasies by Telemann. An interesting aspect of his fellowship was when he was a member of "Corresponding Society of Musical Sciences" because herein showed an exciting example of his composing techniques and stunning skill. When being asked to join this group, he first waited until the membership number 14 came as his numerologic name in Western alphabet BACH=2+1+3+8 was 14. The process of admission was to submit a portrait (at those times painting) and a sample of artistic work. He combined both, a portrait and

an artistic work, into one: On the famous picture, he held a little piece of musical composition in his hand. Then, he turned the table around, making this a task for the spectator to find out the answer. In the musical composition, there was a question ‘it says canon triplex a sei voci, triple-canon for 6 voices’ which means where are the missing three voices? He had taken two themes, by the members, Handel and Froberger, that matched as counterpoints, and added only 11 notes for a third counterpunctual voice. With the techniques of mirror, inversion and retrograde inversion, one can find 480 possible answers altogether. This is an example of his genius, standing out far beyond any other colleagues. Another little joke in this picture was the fact that his jacket had 14 buttons.

5. Symbols in Bach's works

5.1 Numerology

Entering this wide endless field required a short introduction into the technique of gematria in Bach's compositions. It was derived from the “Cabbala”, the symbolic translation of letters and numbers. It started out with simple counting the alphabetic letters and relating each of them to a mathematic number. From there, in a wider sense and into large dimensions and meanings, it was a whole religious key. One of the most well-known examples might be the meaning of the number three, standing for (religious) trinity and love. Bach as a thoroughly religious musician – by the Bach Society Schaffhausen even nicknamed the “fifth Evangelist” – apparently built his entire works out of gematric translations. Yet, little was known and discovered. And how it was counted and calculated, it was too stunning to believe. For example, the Chaconne had 32 variations, which was the sum of the musical note-letters in the name JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH: $H8 + A1 + E5 + B2 + A1 + A1 + B2 + A1 + C3 + H8 = 32$

5.2 The Role of the Bible

Bach owned a Bible in three volumes, in which he wrote the remark: “It is a great evidence that besides other forms of the church services also the music has been ordered from God's spirit through David.” Considering this, it was reasonable to believe that Bach related the compositional numbers to biblical pictures. The Chaconne's bass theme was built out of 17 notes. 17 stood for truth; using the technique of “numeros electorum” we reached: $1+2+3+...+17=153$. 153 in the bible is the number of fish in St. Peter's net.

5.3 Bach's own Testimony

As stated, the name BACH adds up to 14. 14×3 is 42. In the Bible, these were 42 (14×3) generations from Abraham to Christ. Bach felt certainly close to that. He loved to write “solio deo gloria” under his works, saying “for the glory of God alone”. One more example of this relation is the number 48 that stood for $B2 \times A1 \times C3 \times H8$ and $J9 + N13 + R17 + J9$. The letters marked on the cross of Christ.

5.4 Choral Background

It was found out that in the middle part of the Chaconne, there was the Christian church tune “Vom Himmel hoch da komm' ich her” (from Heaven high I am coming down). From this aspect, musicologists have searched for more tunes and found out that those can be synchronically performed as background songs together with the Chaconne. However, it still remained unclear, whether or not, this has been Bach's idea and his inner intention. What was clearly illustrated was that his music had a choral spiritual background, literally and symbolically.

5.5 Bach's wife passed away

It is said that Bach found his first wife Maria Barbara dead when he had returned home from a trip. The beginning of the Chaconne numerologically wrote her name, Maria Barbara: $41 + 40 \text{ notes} = 81$. D-minor stood for dying

,whereas the Chaconne, with the middle part in D Major, stood for victory, resurrection or one may say as rebirth. In Bach's Christmas Oratorio, the opening used 32nd-notes running down in D major, suggesting the arrival of Christ from Heaven. In the Chaconne ,the 32nd-notes ran exactly opposite way upwards – one may assume, suggesting death. Throughout the history , d minor has been the picture of death such as in Mozart Requiem, Beethoven 9th Symphony, Schubert "Death and the Maiden", "Gretchen am Spinnrade" and many others.

6. Variety of Characters

The Chaconne included all facettes of colours and moods that were possible on a violin such as Full 4-voice chords, arpeggio, march, runs, long legato lines, high register and positions, deep pianissimo two-voice imitation, lyric and aggressive elements, choral, dotted dance rhythms. It was endless and complete.

7. Instrumental Demands

It may be well assumed that the techniques, chords, arpeggio, runs, uneven legato, positions bariolages, he requested from the

performer had been used on a violin before or circa his time, by many masters such as Tartini, Vivaldi, Corelli and so on What appeared to be a new achievement in the Chaconne, at least, was the 4-voice chord that held one of the middle voices. Other than that, what made the piece demanding is its duration, roughly 14 minutes.

8. Derivations

In order to understand the magnitude of this movement, it should be performed together with the 4 preceding basic partita movement. It was not intimately related to the length, but rather due to the fact that all five movements were opened and built out of the same harmonic progression. This was a phenomenon in great compositions that held a complete work together and built a large expressive tension throughout the piece in one.

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